

TORAH BATTLES

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"[Yosef] sent his brothers away. As they were leaving he told them, 'Don't argue on the road.'" (Bereshith 45:24)

Yosef was not worried that they might have a petty argument over some trivial matter; rather he cautioned them not to become involved in intricate halachic discussions. Yet the Torah commands us to learn Torah whenever we can, especially when we are traveling. Why then should Yosef have told them not to discuss Torah topics on the road? Yosef was actually concerned for their safety: Torah learning can result in fierce conflicts in the struggle to arrive at a clear understanding of the Torah's true intent. Because of the superior strength of Yosef's brothers, and the dangers of the road that threaten any traveler, Yosef was fearful that some tragedy might result if they involved themselves in such disputes (1).

Shlomo HaMelech tells us that the Torah's ways are ways of pleasantness (2). This being the case, how can learning Torah lead to vehement disputes? One of the qualities of a Jew is that he does not accept anything that is not absolute truth. Indeed, it is forbidden to accept teachings as Torah unless one is convinced that they are absolutely true (3). When two people study Torah together, since they are both working towards the same goal - both are battling to arrive at the truth - it is inevitable that when they finally agree upon the truth, pleasantness will reign between them. Although two people learning Torah may at first be enemies, by the time they together arrive at the truth they will be the closest of friends (4).

Rav Yochanan and Reish Lakish shared just such a relationship. Every time Rav Yochanan spoke words of Torah, Reish Lakish would bombard him with questions. Nevertheless, Rav Yochanan loved Reish Lakish so much that when Reish Lakish died Rav Yochanan tore thirteen garments in mourning (5). For one who avidly seeks the truth, a refutation of his words is much more valuable than a proof to support his viewpoint. So much so that our Sages often tried to refute their own opinions (6).

When two people are arguing over matters of Torah or halachah, one or the other will often make a mistake in the course of their discussion. Can he be considered guilty of falsehood? Since both are involved in the pursuit of ultimate truth, and since their discussion will eventually bring them to the truth, each one may assert his own view freely, for there is no problem of falsehood in their arguing (7).

1. Rashi on Bereshith 45:24.
 2. Mishlei 3:17.
 3. Rashba, Responsa 548.
 4. Kiddushin 30b.
 5. Bava Metzia 84a.
 6. Brachoth 33a; Shabbath 128b; Eruvin 9b, 88a; Gittin 38b; Kiddushin 50b; Menachoth 49a.
 7. Chatham Sofer, Responsa 6:6.
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